

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

May 18, 2005

SAN DIEGUITO RIVER PARK COAST TO CREST TRAIL

File No. 05-031

Project Manager: Prentiss Williams

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred seventy-seven thousand dollars (\$177,000) to the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority to construct a portion of the Coast to Crest Trail, a multi-use regional trail system that will eventually run from the Pacific Ocean in Del Mar 55 miles east to Volcan Mountain. (Exhibits 1 & 2)

LOCATION: The Cities of San Diego and Del Mar, San Diego County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: San Dieguito River Park Planning Area

Exhibit 3: Environmental Impact Report/Statement (*Separate CD*)

Exhibit 4: Coastal portion of the Coast to Crest Trail

Exhibit 5: Letters of Support

Exhibit 6: JPA Findings & Statement of Overriding Considerations

Exhibit 7: JPA Resolution

Exhibit 8: JPA Notice of Determination

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred seventy-seven thousand dollars to the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority (the JPA) for the construction of a portion of the Coast to Crest Trail subject to the following condition:

Prior to the disbursement of funds for construction, the JPA shall submit for the review and

approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:

- a) Evidence that the JPA has obtained all necessary permits and approvals and has conducted all necessary environmental review.
- b) A signing plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy participation.
- c) A final work plan (including the names of any subcontractors to be used in the completion of the project), and a project schedule and budget.
- d) An agreement between the JPA, Southern California Edison and the 22nd District Agricultural Association sufficient to allow the project to be built, operated for public access, and maintained for a period of no less than twenty years.
- e) An encroachment permit with the California Department of Transportation sufficient to allow the project to be built, operated for public access, and maintained for a period of no less than twenty years.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Sections 31400 et. seq. of the Public Resources Code regarding coastal access.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Coastal Conservancy has independently reviewed the Environmental Impact Report/ Environmental Impact Statement (attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3) and findings adopted by the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Agency(attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 6) for the project and finds that there is no substantial evidence that the project, as mitigated, may have a significant effect on the environment.
4. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff proposes that the Coastal Conservancy authorize the disbursement of an amount not to exceed \$177,000 to the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority (the JPA) to enable the JPA to construct the coastal portion of the Coast to Crest Trail in conjunction with the implementation of the San Dieguito Lagoon wetland restoration project. The JPA would use the proposed Conservancy grant to match a \$1,361,000 federal Transportation Enhancement Activities (TEA) grant that it received earlier this year to complete a 12,771-foot segment of the Coast to Crest Trail from the El Camino Real Bridge to the Jimmy Durante Boulevard Bridge (Exhibit 4). The JPA intends to connect the coastal portion of the trail to an existing public trail located on the eastern side of El Camino Real in a future project phase. That trail connection would require an under-crossing of the El Camino Real Bridge, which will be designed and analyzed in association with a future bridge/road improvement project currently under consideration for El Camino Real by the City of San Diego.

The Coast to Crest Trail will be a regional trail system for hikers, bicyclists, equestrians and, where feasible, wheelchair users. When completed, it will extend for 55 miles from Volcan Mountain, north of the town of Julian to the beach at Del Mar (Exhibit 2). The Coast to Crest Trail will consist of two separate trail types which will be aligned side-by-side for most of the trail system's distance but which may be separated in some locations. One trail type, designed to accommodate hikers and equestrians, would be an average of four feet in width and would have a tread surface of native soil or decomposed granite. The other trail type would be designed to accommodate bicyclists and other users who require a hardened surface such as wheelchair riders. This trail type, which is intended to meet the standards of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Class 1 bike path standards of the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans), would be 8 feet wide and be surfaced with concrete, soil cement or polymer binder.

The portion of the Coast to Crest Trail that is the subject of this funding request would run along the north side of the San Dieguito River at the edge of the restored wetlands. The trail would run west from El Camino Real past the site of a proposed Nature/Interpretive Center (to be constructed in a future project phase). From the site of the future Nature Center, the trail would continue west and south, crossing under Interstate Highway 5 (I-5) via the north bay of the I-5 Bridge. On the west side of I-5, the trail would skirt the southernmost edge of the Del Mar Fairgrounds property, owned by the 22nd District Agricultural Association (DAA). At the western end of the fairgrounds property, equestrian use of the trail would terminate and bicyclists would be directed to the existing bike lanes on Jimmy Durante Boulevard where they could then travel south to Powerhouse Park. Hikers would continue to follow along the north side of the river on an elevated boardwalk until the path reached an existing ramp leading up to Jimmy Durante Boulevard. Future project phases are expected to extend the trail westward over property owned by the City of Del Mar to provide access to the proposed San Diego Coastal Rail Trail and, ultimately, the beach

Several special design features are proposed for the trail to insure compatibility with adjacent existing land uses and the soon-to-be-created wetlands and other sensitive habitats. For much of the trail's alignment, fencing would also be installed along the southern or eastern edge of the trail to provide a physical barrier between trail users and existing and future wetland areas. The trail has been designed to avoid runoff into adjacent wetlands and all trail treads will be composed of materials approved by the California Coastal Commission as suitable for use in proximity to wetland habitats.

The proposed grant recipient is the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority, a local government agency in operation since 1989 with responsibility for acquiring natural open space, restoring habitat and providing recreation and educational interpretation in the San Dieguito River Park. The JPA currently owns and manages 1,200 acres of natural open space and 22 miles of multi-use trails in the San Dieguito River Valley and has initiated and implemented a number of construction and restoration projects in the Park. The JPA has four full-time rangers with responsibility for open space management, enforcement of rules and regulations, litter and dumping clean-up, and habitat restoration.

The Coast to Crest Trail will be an important regional trail system linking inland areas with the coast and with the California Coastal Trail. As such, completion of the trail is a high priority for the Coastal Conservancy. Construction of the San Dieguito Lagoon Wetland Restoration Project will commence this summer and the trail must be constructed at the same time in order to minimize environmental impacts and disruption to the area. It will not be feasible to build the trail once the wetland restoration is underway. The Conservancy funds are necessary at this time to match the federal TEA grant to enable the trail construction to proceed at the same time as construction commences on the wetland restoration project this summer.

Site Description:

The proposed trail alignment runs through largely vacant lands consisting of previously cultivated transitional lands, wetlands, seasonal marsh, and river floodplain. A portion of the trail will skirt the edge of a dirt lot used as overflow parking for the Del Mar Racetrack/Del Mar Fairgrounds. This parking lot is operated seasonally by the 22nd District Agricultural Association (DAA) for the seven-week racing season and for the Del Mar Fair (20 days during the middle of June and early July). Existing uses adjacent to the proposed trail alignment include an equestrian center operated by the 22nd District Agricultural Association, and the Surf and Turf driving range and mini golf center.

The Coast to Crest Trail has been aligned at the outermost edge of the wetland restoration area to minimize impacts to wetlands and other sensitive habitat and to minimize construction impacts. However, a small portion of the trail (0.014 acres) would be constructed in an area that could be defined as wetlands by the California Coastal Commission, the City of San Diego or the US Army Corps of Engineers definition. The JPA evaluated the impacts to this area and considered them to be less than significant. A discussion of these potential impacts to wetlands can be found in the “Consistency with CEQA” section below and in Exhibit 6, pp 67-70.

Project History: The Coastal Conservancy has been involved with efforts to preserve and restore the San Dieguito Lagoon and River since 1979 when the Conservancy participated with the City of Del Mar in the completion of the “San Dieguito Lagoon Resource Enhancement Program,” which outlined projects west of I-5 including the restoration of a 70-acre tidal basin dredged by the California Department of Fish and Game in 1983. In 1989, the City of Del Mar developed the “Conceptual Plan for the Expanded San Dieguito Lagoon Resource Enhancement Program,” which proposed restoring the lagoon system to its historic extent east of I-5 with neighboring uplands.

In 2000, the JPA completed the “Park Master Plan for the Coastal Area of the San Dieguito River Valley Regional Open Space Park” (Master Plan) with partial funding from Coastal Conservancy. The JPA was formed in 1989 by the County of San Diego and the Cities of Del Mar, Escondido, Poway, San Diego and Solana Beach for the purpose of creating a greenway and natural open space park system in the San Dieguito River Valley. In 1994, the JPA adopted a Concept Plan for the 55-mile San Dieguito River Park. (The JPA adopted a revised and updated Concept Plan in 2002.)

In 1992, the California Coastal Commission directed Southern California Edison to substantially create 150 acres of wetlands at the San Dieguito Lagoon. This wetland restoration plan was

augmented with funds secured in 1990 from the Coastal Conservancy, USFWS and JPA to plan transitional, upland and freshwater habitat. This work culminated in the Master Plan for the restoration of wetlands and associated uplands from El Camino Real to the Pacific Ocean and was approved by the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority Board of Directors in September 2000. SCE, the USFWS and the JPA will have obtained all of the permits necessary to implement the wetland restoration project and begin construction this summer.

At its meeting on May 27, 2004, the Coastal Conservancy granted funds to the JPA to purchase the 73.4-acre Boudreau property located on the eastern end of the wetland restoration area. The Boudreau property represented a critical west-east link between other publicly owned river corridor parcels along the 55-mile San Dieguito River Park and its purchase allowed the JPA to secure almost the entire coastal area from El Camino Real to the Pacific Ocean in public ownership.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 177,000
TEA Grant*	<u>1,361,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$1,538,000

* Federal Transportation Enhancement Activities Grant Program

The expected source of the proposed grant would be the Conservancy's FY 02/03 appropriation from the Coastal Access Account of the Coastal Conservancy Fund, which is funded through Coastal Development Permit fees. Consistent with the purposes of this funding source, the proposed project would involve a grant to a public agency for the development, maintenance, and operation of facilities that provide public access to the shoreline of the sea (Public Resources Code Section 30620 (c) (2)).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Division 21, Chapter 9, of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31409), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Through the proposed action, the Conservancy would continue its role in supporting the development of an important public accessway along a major segment of the California coast.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to a public agency for accessways that serve more than local public needs. The proposed San Dieguito River Park Coast to Crest Trail would provide access to the coast from a heavily populated inland area and will be an important regional trail system.

Consistent with § 31400.2, staff recommends approval of this project after evaluating the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy in light of the total amount of available for coastal

public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects (see discussion below), and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority. The proposed authorization would leverage matching funds, providing an almost 8 to 1 ratio of federal dollars to Conservancy dollars needed to complete the access project.

Section 31400.3 states that the Conservancy may assist public agencies in developing and implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The proposed project would further these goals by providing a major connecting public trail to a heavily-visited coastal area as part of a comprehensive public access plan.

Section 31408 charges the Conservancy, in consultation with the Department of Parks and Recreation, to develop the California Coastal Trail. Section 31409 provides authority to award grants and provide assistance to link the California Coastal Trail to inland trail systems. The Coast to Crest Trail constitutes a major inland trail system which, when completed, will connect to the segment of the California Coastal Trail planned for this area.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E** of the Strategic Plan, the proposed project would result in the construction of approximately 2.5 miles of the San Dieguito River Coast to Crest Trail, a river parkway trail system that connects inland populations with the coast.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** There is widespread public support for the completion of the Coast to Crest Trail system. The proposed project has the support of local organizations and elected officials, including State Senator Christine Kehoe and County Supervisor Pam Slater-Price. Letters received in support of the proposed project are included in Exhibit 5.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the Cities of San Diego and Del Mar.
5. **Need:** The Coastal Conservancy grant is needed by the JPA to provide the non-federal matching funds required by the TEA grant program. Without these matching funds, the project cannot move forward.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The coastal areas of San Diego County are some of the most heavily visited in the State and the proposed Coast to Crest Trail in San Dieguito River Park will provide additional recreational opportunities for the millions of visitors who come to coast each year. San Dieguito River Park already serves an estimated 46,344 visitors each year along its inland trails. Once the restoration project is completed, the restored San Dieguito wetlands can be are expected to attract visitors from throughout the region and the state, and this coastal segment of the Coast to Crest Trail would provide an important means by which people can visit and enjoy them. Further, by providing a connection to the coast from inland areas, the Coast to Crest Trail, when completed, will in and of itself constitute a recreational resource of state and regional importance.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** As discussed in the “Project Description” section above, the wetland restoration and trail construction project are fully permitted and ready to commence this summer.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
15. **Cooperation:** Both the wetland restoration project and the trail project will involve the participation and cooperation of a number of jurisdictions and organizations, including the Cities of Del Mar and San Diego, SCE, DAA, USFWS, CalTrans and nearby private property owners.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE COASTAL CONSERVANCY’S STANDARDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCESSWAY LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT:

The proposed project would be consistent with those of the Coastal Conservancy’s “Standards And Recommendations For Accessway Location And Development” standards which apply as follows:

Consistent with Standard No. 1, the proposed segment of the Coast to Crest Trail has been designed to minimize alteration of natural landforms and be subordinate to the natural setting and to protect environmentally sensitive habitats.

Consistent with Standard No. 5, the proposed project is consistent with the policies of Chapter Three of the Coastal Act, and has been designed to avoid adverse impacts to sensitive wetland areas, and has been reviewed by the Department of Fish and Game and the Coastal Commission.

Consistent with Standard No. 13, the proposed project would “accommodate or plan to accommodate those with mobility problems,” and thus is of “the highest priority for State funding.” The surface materials and grade of the trail has been intentionally designed to meet American Disabilities Act (ADA) access standards and provide barrier-free coastal access.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Local Coastal Program policies of the City of Del Mar and the City of San Diego.

Construction of the proposed trail segment would be consistent with the Land Use Plan of the City of San Diego’s North City Local Coastal Plan, certified on March 31, 1981, which calls for:

“...maximum public access consistent with resource protection through the provision of alternative modes of public access such as public transportation and properly designed pedestrian and bicycle routes.”

The proposed trail would be located partly within the area governed by Torrey Pines Community Plan, which is incorporated into the North City LCP and contains the following policy concerning public accessways:

“Public access in areas of environmentally sensitive habitats shall be limited to low-intensity recreational, scientific, or educational use. Access shall be controlled or confined to designated trails or paths, and no access shall be approved which results in disruption of habitat.”

As discussed in the “Project Description” section above, the proposed project is designed to be consistent with the approved wetland restoration project.

Most of the proposed trail segment lies within the jurisdiction of the City of Del Mar. The City of Del Mar LCP Land Use Plan, certified on March 18, 1993, contains the following policies relating to public access which pertain to the proposed project.

Policy IV-5 provides that continuous public access trail easements be granted as conditions of development within certain designated areas, including the shore of the San Dieguito River and Lagoon. Public access must be provided in a manner that minimizes disturbance to natural systems and minimizes impacts on wildlife and sensitive habitats. As described in the “project Description,” the proposed trail segment has been sited and designed to avoid or minimize impacts to sensitive resources and habitats.

Policy IV-18 recommends that the City cooperate with other local, state and federal agencies in developing a system of pedestrian trails and bicycle paths that would link together coastal recreation areas such as beaches and San Dieguito Lagoon.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), the JPA and the USFWS as lead agencies, undertook environmental assessment of the entire San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project, which encompassed the trail construction project described in this staff recommendation. The JPA and the USFWS prepared and circulated an Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS) for the project (Exhibit 3). The JPA found that the San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project would result in the following significant and unmitigatable environmental impacts:

- Loss of Agriculturally Important Lands
- Landform Alteration Resulting from Disposal of Excavated Material On-site
- Visual Impacts Related to the Contrast in Appearance of the Nesting Site with the Surrounding Area

Other impacts were identified as potentially significant, but mitigable to below a level of significance through the implementation of specific mitigation measures. The JPA adopted a Statement of Overriding Considerations and certified the EIR/EIS by resolution dated September

15, 2000 (Exhibit 7). The JPA also adopted, incident to its certification of the EIR/EIS, Findings regarding the each of the impacts of the wetland restoration project disclosed in the EIR/EIS (Exhibit 6).

The EIR/EIS found that construction of the coastal section of the Coast to Crest Trail project, which is the subject of this staff recommendation, could have possible significant effects on the environment in four areas: Land Use, Hydrology/Water Quality, Biological Resources, and Traffic/Circulation. The potential environmental impacts associated with the proposed project and the corresponding mitigations, are identified and discussed in detail in Exhibit 3 and Exhibit 6 and are summarized below:

Land Use

Impact: The Coast to Crest Trail could conflict with use of the 22nd District Agricultural Association's seasonal parking lot and Surf and Turf golf driving range.

Mitigation: A 5- to 6-foot-high fence with 1-inch or smaller mesh shall be provided between the driving range and the trail. A lodgepole or post and cable fence shall be provided between the trail and the District's parking areas. In coordination with the District, the JPA has designed the final trail alignment to minimize potential conflicts with the seasonal parking lot.

Impact: The preferred alignment for the Coast to Crest Trail east of the Via de la Valle property is to travel along the north side of the San Dieguito River near the southern end of the Horsepark property. This alignment could result in potentially significant land use conflicts between the existing equestrian operation and public trail uses.

Mitigation: Prior to construction of the Coast to Crest Trail, the JPA shall coordinate the trail alignment with the District to ensure that use conflicts have been minimized. Measures such as the installation of fences, gates, and possibly vegetative screening shall be considered and District staff shall be consulted to determine the best alignment for the trail through the Horsepark facility.

Hydrology/Water Quality

Impact: Public use of the proposed trails may result in greater amounts of trash, debris, and wastes from domestic animals (e.g., horses). Runoff containing these materials could adversely impact surface water quality.

Mitigation: The JPA will expand the current trail maintenance program to cover the trails located within the current project area. This maintenance program will include the requirement to perform regular trail maintenance, including manure and trash removal from and around the trail. Trail tread maintenance intended to avoid erosion problems on natural soil surfaced trails will occur on as-needed basis. The maintenance program will include a monitoring component that will determine when and how often trail cleanup should occur. This could result in more frequent maintenance, but under no circumstances will trail cleanup occur less than once every two weeks.

Biological Resources

Impact: Two portions of the trail would be constructed within 100 feet of the restored wetlands.

Mitigation: Fencing will be placed along these portions of the trail to prevent people, horses and dogs from entering the restored wetlands. Dog owners will be required to keep their dogs leashed while using the trail. Bags and trash cans will be provided at all trail heads to encourage the collection and proper disposal of dog waste. Other measures to prevent off-trail activity include signage and expansion of the JPA's volunteer trail patrol. The buffer area between the trail and the restored wetland will be planted with coastal sage scrub transitional vegetation to lessen the amount of disturbance to wildlife from trail users. The JPA and the USFWS will also monitor the restored wetlands systematically to rapidly detect signs of unauthorized access on the restored wetland areas. Any encroachment beyond the trail will be remedied through a combination of signage, public education, increased trail patrols, limitations on access and, if necessary, more restrictive fencing.

Impact: Construction of a portion of the trail could impact approximately 0.014 acres of historic tidal and/or seasonal wetlands.

Mitigation: Based on current use of this area as a gravel-surfaced maintenance road, the area may no longer qualify as jurisdictional wetlands, however this will ultimately be determined by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE). Should USAOC determine that this area does constitute jurisdictional wetlands, the JPA has found that trail construction in this area would not result in any impacts to wetlands that would not have otherwise occurred as the result of continuing use of the area as a road and would therefore be less than significant. Moreover, the significant increase in tidal and other wetlands that would result from the overall wetland restoration project would compensate for the any losses that might result from the construction of a portion of trail on this area.

Traffic/Circulation

Impact: Construction of the Coast to Crest Trail from I-5 west to Jimmy Durante Boulevard could significantly reduce the number of parking spaces (up to 150) in the District-owned dirt parking lot located south and east of Jimmy Durante Boulevard during high volume Del Mar Fair days.

Mitigation: The Plan Implementation section of the Master Park Plan for the lagoon area will include the following requirements: (1) The JPA will work with the District to refine the current alignment for the Coast to Crest Trail in the area west of I-5 in order to minimize the loss of parking spaces along the southern edge of the parking lot; and (2) the JPA will work with the District to develop a contingency parking plan for days of very high attendance that could involve permitting parking on the trail, where feasible, and use of the 60 space parking lot at the proposed visitor/interpretive center.

The JPA prepared and adopted a Mitigation, Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP) to ensure that these measures are strictly enforced. A Notice of Determination was filed by the JPA on September 15, 2000 (Exhibit 8).

Staff has reviewed the JPA's EIR/EIS and associated Findings and concurs that the proposed project, as mitigated, will not have a significant adverse effect on the environment. Staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the project, as mitigated, will not have a significant effect on the environment as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382. Staff will file a Notice of Determination upon the Conservancy's authorization of the project.